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ABSTRACT

The role of history in a modern social studies program is unclear. The reason for the weakening of history's place in the curriculum is also unclear since educators generally agree that history and literature should be the core subjects in any humanities or cultural studies program. The problems posed by history instruction in a modern educational setting and in making history courses relevant stem both from the nature of the discipline and from the way history is often taught. History can contribute various levels of generalization and understanding to an issues-oriented social studies course. Although history does lend itself to narration, description, and chronology, many prospective social studies teachers find it difficult to relate history to behavioral sciences and to the present. In spite of numerous problems related to the teaching of history, historians should not despair that their subject will be removed from the junior and senior high school curriculum. Instead, they should look forward to a future in which history will be incorporated into the social studies in an innovative manner. (Author/DB)

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HISTORY AND THE SOCIAL STUDIES
by Harris L. Dante

It is generally agreed that history has had a significant role to play in man's search for the truth ever since Clio was given a central part in the division of knowledge by the ancients. History gives us perspective, a sense of time, an insight into where we have been, knowledge that aids in coping with contemporary problems and an understanding of enduring principles and values. Some have stated that history is the all encompassing discipline and that it serves as a link between the humanities and the social sciences.

There is little doubt that history along with literature should be the core subjects in any humanities or cultural studies program. There is less agreement on the role of history in a modern social studies program, nor is there any simple or universal explanation for the weakening of history's place in the curriculum.

Today there is considerable consensus that the social studies involves much more than the social sciences simplified for instructional purposes. The emphasis is on reflective thinking and decision making in regard to the grievous problems of our time.¹ In this education for citizenship a primary task of the social studies teacher is to help students change their frame of reference and to study issues in as many different contexts as possible. This becomes necessary because the conclusions which students have accepted may not rest on any evidence, that is they are mere preferences or prejudices, or because a generalization which was valid has become outdated. Moreover, the teacher has to be, in the words of Earl Johnson, both "a priest and a prophet." It is necessary to pass on our cultural heritage, but it is also necessary to pass on it.²

This goal for the social studies has rendered them almost pedagogically unmanageable, if not impossible. The teacher must deal with a half dozen or more of the social science disciplines, plus have a knowledge of contemporary problems, selecting what is significant for study and developing the relations that will aid students in understanding the world in which they live. Moreover, the social studies teacher deals with subject matter which has no fixed continuity or sequence and has to interest students in concepts that are often abstractions.

There is no doubt that in dealing with contemporary issues history is unique and presents a difficult teaching problem. The historian does have some particular disadvantages since he deals largely with circumstantial evidence.

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His chief witnesses are out in the graveyard and cannot be summoned for cross-examination. Important evidence, as well as witnesses, may be missing, while others may attempt to deceive him. Thus, it may be that historical generalizations are less definitive than those of the behavioral science and certainly the predictive value of history is limited and hazardous.

However, to assert that history has little to contribute to a social studies program is hardly justifiable. The certainty of generalizations in any of the social sciences is relative and less conclusive than those of the physical sciences. Moreover, there are various levels of generalizations and many understandings related to contemporary society require more than quantitative analysis, since they deal with man, his motives, his changeability, and even the part played by historical accident.

Thus, the study of the causes of the Civil War could develop the view that the American political system works through compromise, that our two major parties are made up of divergent interests, and that when men took a stand on a moral issue in 1860 they split the Union. On the other hand, many political scientists would say that the times in which we live are too critical not to face up to them, and that we should reorganize the parties along conservative and liberal lines. In any event the student who studies the Civil War in this manner would gain not only an understanding of the conflict itself but would also gain valuable insights into how our political system has developed and how it works. Significant generalizations could be established even though it is not possible to go back into the Civil War period with a Gallup-poll type interview.

History, therefore, can contribute in a meaningful way to an issues oriented curriculum and recent events have stimulated an interest in history by the general public. Note the alacrity with which the impeachment hearings sent people to their history books and the current interest regarding the last time an incumbent President was denied renomination by his party. Nevertheless, with the emphasis on the present, with the increased role given the behavioral sciences, and with some curriculum innovations it is quite proper to inquire into the role to be played by history.

Historians have been running scared, ever since the coming of the World History course replaced two or even three years of history. Both the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians have expressed concern regarding the crisis in history. An OAH report has surveyed the current status in each of the fifty states in 1974-75 and 1975-76. The conclusion was that the situation affects both higher and secondary education and while it "is moderating in some places . . . it continues to be serious throughout the nation."³ As the report indicates, the qualifications for teachers, the courses required by law, and the place of history in the curriculum vary among the states.⁴

In states like Ohio where history is mandated at both the junior high and senior high school level enrollments have remained quite stable. "In 1973-74 there were 485,455 students enrolled in fifty different history titled courses in Ohio secondary schools."⁵ This was 49.8 per cent of a total of 921,004 enrolled in social studies. However, it is difficult to say what would happen to history enrollments if this mandate were removed. At the college level the number of students taking history courses has sharply declined.

The fears of historians may be premature because the social studies probably cannot live without history and the question faced by social studies educators may be closer to how can they live with it. Curriculum patterns across the nation have not changed a great deal and other disciplines have been more successful in incorporating content in existing courses rather than by securing separate courses of their own.

For example, in spite of the money and effort spent on behalf of economics the results have been disappointing. Numerous school systems have made plans to introduce economics courses into their programs only to discover that they had no one to teach them or to provide leadership. In Ohio in 1973-74 only 20,230 students were enrolled in various economics courses, while sociology had only 39,941. There were 85,182 in courses entitled social studies, but these courses could be anything. They might even be history courses. In fact, from a curricular standpoint one could almost say that in too many instances the term social studies is only a course label. Very few schools really have a truly integrated social studies course. The title often is a cloak for one of the separate social science disciplines. Moreover, although many institutions have comprehensive social studies programs, which prepare teachers for multidisciplinary teaching, very few have truly interdisciplinary courses or prepare teachers for an interdisciplinary curriculum.

Nevertheless, history is on the defensive and has been attacked by historians, as well as others, for the meagre results achieved, considering the dominant place that history has had in the social studies curriculum. In deploring the lack of knowledge of history that students bring to their classes, college historians are illogical in blaming, by implication at least, the high school teachers who are their own students. It would have been interesting if The New York Times American History Knowledge and Attitude Survey had tested college seniors rather than college freshmen.⁶

Historians have often claimed inherent values for their discipline and the importance of knowing about the past. Granting the importance of a knowledge of history the question of which past and the problem of selection of the content to be studied arises. It has also been noted that students have failed to learn the historical method which the historian seeks to impart. There are also difficulties in using history to both build an allegiance to the culture while at the same time teaching students critical analysis.⁷

If history is in decline and its place in a social studies program under question, the reasons are surely complex and not unique to history in every case. Part of it is related to the nature of the discipline and the way it is often taught. History long ago ceased to be merely past politics and historians have always recognized that their chief purpose has been to interpret the past to their own generation. This is why each generation writes its own history anew. A good case in point is the reinterpretation of the Reconstruction period in the light of the contemporary civil rights movement.

However, history does lend itself readily to narration, description and chronology. Many prospective social studies teachers, even though enrolled in comprehensive programs, often find it difficult to find relationships with the behavioral sciences and with the present.

It is easier to tell a story and to be expository than to raise analytical questions. It is easier to chronicle the past than to use history to give meaning to the problems of an insistent present. Too many students are put through a repetitious cycle of regurgitation with limited retention of isolated facts and an uncritical acceptance of generalizations that are dubious at best.

Nor is history the only social science that presents problems in the effort to make its content a meaningful part of a social studies program. Economists have generally failed to make their discipline less dismal. The participants in a recent national conference of economists and economics educators raised questions regarding the reasons why more economics is not taught in the schools and what could be done to make it more relevant.⁸ Historians would have been surprised at the similarity with their concerns and astonished to learn that behavioral scientists do not feel that they have it made. In fact there is more agreement among economists that concentration on economic growth has done little to solve the great social disorders of our time and that the nature of modern social problems is going to force more interdisciplinary understanding and more application of economic theory.⁹ One recent research study concluded: "Economic educators of the future should be known perhaps as social science educators" or should be able "to promote economic education within a broader interdisciplinary context."¹⁰

Another significant reason for decline of enrollment in history and also in the behavioral sciences, particularly at the college level, is the general collapse of general education and the liberal arts. Increased emphasis on vocational and technical education has brought about a lessening of universal requirements in which history had always been given a prominent part. General education and education for citizenship are no longer given as the primary goals of secondary education.

In far too many cases there is a quick acceptance of fads or little attention given to careful programming of what could be significant curriculum innovation. Social studies courses are often not accurately described by their labels. Mini courses and modules are too often thinly disguised conventional units in a traditional course. In other instances they consist of a hodgepodge of topics to be sampled by students with little articulation or integration. Scope and sequence are given scant consideration.

Thus the future of history is bound up not only with pedagogical problems and the goal of the social studies but it is also part of confusing curriculum patterns. The question is not so much whether history can contribute to any humanities or social studies program, but rather how it can best be organized. Will it be taught as a separate discipline or will it have a key role to play as part of a multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary social studies curriculum? In the future, however it may be organized, history will be issues centered and relevant to the present. When not programmed in its traditional forms it will be an important and integral part in a modern social studies program.

Richard Brown has written that history "ought to go by the boards entirely unless ways could be found to make it more pertinent in the growth and development of human beings than the traditional courses have all too often been."¹¹

The late Alan Griffin, one of the theoretical architects of the "new social studies", always used history as the means of getting his students in an intellectual jam and inspiring them to engage in reflective thinking. He could find opportunities for inquiry in ancient history, which would result in the establishment of universal generalizations applicable to the present.¹²

E.B. Wesley, who has long been a proponent of history, has written that history is a resource, a service study, and a compilation that can no more be taught than can the World Almanac, the dictionary, or the encyclopedia. However, he believes that: "History might be saved and even enriched by merging into the social studies, which could utilize it continuously."¹³

Robert Pearson sees history as making "a natural core for a social studies curriculum" which could be used to devise a truly interdisciplinary approach.¹⁴

Whatever form it takes, history will be an important part of social studies instruction. The only question would seem to be will it be in the curriculum only because it is mandated by superpatriots or because insightful teachers have discovered its relevance and ways of giving it meaning as an integral contribution to a modern social studies program.

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FOOTNOTES

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